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Nurses in PHS Celebrate Proud History

By Cynthia Bender

Nurses in the Commissioned Corps of the U.S. Public Health Service are celebrating their centennial this year. They are commemorating a history of expanding service, education and research on behalf of the public's health care needs.

The section of the Public Health Service known as the Commissioned Corps was established in 1889, and it was about this time that the first nurse was commissioned. The Public Health Service was created almost a century earlier in 1798 by an act of Congress to provide for the care and relief of sick and injured seamen. It was originally known as the U.S. Marine Hospital and early records indicate care was provided by a doctor and a nurse.

By 1912 when the name was changed to the U.S. Public Health Service, nurses were employed on Ellis Island in New York; at Pellagra Hospital in South Carolina; Munitions Hospital in West Virginia; a hospital for Federal workers in Washington, D.C., and at all marine hospitals for merchant seamen.

As World War I came to an end in 1918, many sick and injured servicemen needed care. Since the Public Health Service (PHS) had responsibility for the care of these servicemen, it arranged for Lucy Minnigerode, a nurse, to make a survey of the care available in various marine hospitals. Following the survey, she was appointed superintendent of nurses. It was her responsibility to organize a nursing service for 23 marine hospitals and to plan the staffing for a total of 20,500 beds by April 1922. During the next three years, the number of nurses under Minnigerode's supervision grew to 1,800.

PHS Nurses Serve in Varied Settings

Public Health Service nurses have served a variety of populations and groups in a multitude of national, state and local settings. When the Veterans Administration (VA) was established in 1922, more than 1,400 nurses were transferred from the PHS to the VA. As a result, fewer than 400 nurses were available to care for 3,000 patients in the 24 existing marine hospitals. During the same year, the PHS established a nursing school at Fort McHenry, Maryland. The school attracted unusually well-qualified students, but their potential was lost to PHS when they were transferred to the Army School of Nursing. PHS purchased the National Leprosarium at Carville from the state of Louisiana in 1921. The name was later changed to the National Hansen's Disease Center. The center is world renowned for excellence in training, research and treatment of Hansen's Disease.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs asked the PHS to provide competent health care practitioners in 1928; the first Public Health service personnel were subsequently assigned to this activity. Nearly 30 years later responsibility for the health care of American Indians and Alaska natives was transferred to the Public Health Service

In 1930, the Hospital Division of the Public Health Service successfully pioneered development of nursing services in federal prisons where drug addiction was a major problem.

Pearl McIver was appointed Senior Public Health Nursing Consultant in 1934. Her job was to organize and direct the Division of Public Health Nursing. One of the key functions of the Division was to provide public health nursing consultation to the states.

With passage of the Social Security Act in 1935, the demand greatly increased for public health nurse consultants to assist state health department in expanding their public health programs. More than 5,000 PHS nurses were detailed to work through a nationwide network of official public health nursing agencies. Today, the PHS continues to provide consultation to the states.

Cadet Nurse Corps Spurs Education

In 1943, the Bolton Act established the U.S. Cadet Nurse Corps under the auspices of PHS, providing for the training of nurses for the armed forces. Governmental and civilian hospitals, health agencies, and a division of nursing were created within the Public Health Service to administer the Cadet nurse corps program. Lucile Petry, MPHN, was appointed director.

Petry was appointed the first chief nurse officer of the Public Health Service. In 1949 she was promoted to the rank of assistant surgeon general. It was the first time a nurse attained the flag officer rank. Not until the 1970s did nurses in the Army, Navy, and Air Force enjoy such recognition.

The Cadet Nurse Corps was an extremely ambitious program, recruiting 65,000 new student nurses in 1944 and another 60,000 in 1945—about twice the number entering schools of nursing just four years earlier. Total enrollment of the Cadet Nurse Corps was 169,000. These students supplied 80 percent of the nursing service in participating facilities. From 1943 to 1948, when the last students admitted to the corps graduated, expenditures totaled $161 million, equivalent to nearly $800 million in today's dollars. However, the achievements of the corps more than justified the expense. Their impact was so great that the American Hospital Association credited the corps with saving civilian hospital nursing services from collapse. Over half of these students later served in the military.

Almost all schools of nursing participated in the corps. The corps accounted for 83 percent of the total enrollment in schools of nursing from 1943-45. Total student enrollment soared from 85,000 to 129,000 in 1946. It would be 25 years before admissions to schools of nursing would equal the 67,000 of 1944. About 180,000 students were admitted to nursing schools in 1988.

The Cadet Nurse Corps sparked a new beginning in nursing education in this country. Nursing schools became more independent. Curricula were evaluated and restructed. Thousands of nurses received post-graduate education. Hundreds of new facilities were built or upgraded. By the time the program officially ended in 1948, a precedent had been established-schools of nursing and the nurses they graduated were recognized as essential to protecting the nation's health.

NIH and NIMH are Part of PHS

In 1946 the USPHS Surgeon General became chairman of the Public Health Conference. This conference directed the drafting of the constitution of the World Health Organization, which was signed by representatives of 61 countries. The same year saw the establishment of the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), an arm of the National Institutes of Health (NIH). Both are part of PHS. NIMH has been successful in expanding the mental health expertise of nurses by integrating mental health concepts into baccalaureate education. In addition, about 70 percent of the 10,000 psychiatric nursing specialists received clinical training funds from this program. For 20 years, NIMH operated St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Washington, D.C., where some of the earliest nursing research in the mental health arena was conducted.

The Clinical Center at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) opened in 1953. Today it provides a unique setting for clinical research by combining state-of-the-art technology with the laboratory and scientific resources of the NIH. In 1986 the National Center for Nursing Research was established as part of the National Institutes of Health. Its purpose is to support nursing research and education.

Division Supports Research

Nursing education and nursing research have gained considerable momentum in the Public Health Service since the 1940s. In the mid-1950s, the Division of Nursing began awarding fellowships for nursing research and research training. The Nurse Scientist Graduate Training Grants Program, established in 1962, increased the number of nurses prepared to conduct research. Nurses assisted by these grants have helped to build the foundations of the science of nursing. The division administers the Nurse Education Act, earlier named the Nurse Training Act, first passed in 1964.

Through these programs virtually every student nurse in the country has been supported—either directly or indirectly—by funds which improve teaching environments and provide increased educational opportunities.

3,500 Nurses in PHS

Today there are nearly 3,500 Civil Service and Commissioned Corps nurses in the Public Health Service. Nurses work in all components and at all levels of the PHS. Nurses are involved in management and policy decisions in the Office of the Secretary, the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Health, and the Office of the Surgeon General. Nurses are also involved in regulatory and compliance activities of the Food and Drug Administration. Nurses participate in research at the Centers for Disease Control, the National Institutes of Health, and the Alcohol, Drug Abuse and Mental Health Administration.

In addition to these activities, Public Health Service nurses may serve on disaster medical assistance teams to provide flexible and direct responses in all types of civilian disasters. These include natural disasters and national security emergencies.

PHS nurses play significant leadership roles in the management of health care delivery systems in this country and at all levels of nursing service, nursing education and nursing research. Public Health Service nurses are involved in the development of standards in the area of quality assurance. They are involved in pioneering efforts to provide patient care services to populations that are underserved, in evaluating care options available to people with Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) and in deciding how to educate individuals to prevent the spread of AIDS. They participated in all phases of nursing research from concerns of the CDC to those of the NIH, and, in particular at the Center for Nursing Research.

Nursing Leaders Recognized

As the Public Health Service approaches the centennial of the Public Health Commissioned Corps, its nursing leaders are being recognized. O.Marie Henry, DNSc, RN, was appointed as Chief Nurse Officer, USPHS, in 1987.

Fay Abdellah, EdD, RN, FAAN, held this important post for 17 years prior to Henry's appointment. Abdellah continues as deputy surgeon general, the first nurse and woman to serve in this position.

Various activities are being planned to celebrate the centennial, including a Centennial Convocation on Jan. 4 featuring Surgeon General C. Everett Koop at the NIH in Bethesda, MD. A special luncheon at the USPHS Professional Association Annual Meeting in New Orleans, La., will be held in March. Henry will speak on the contributions of USPHS nurses at the convention of the National Student Nurses Association in Cincinnati, Ohio, April 26. Additional activities will be held in conjunction with National Nurses' Day on May 6. Other activities slated are a lecture and reception at the Indian Health Services Council of nursing in Flagstaff, Ariz., in August, and a panel presentation highlighting the past, present and future directions of selected PHS professions in Chicago in October.

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